



SEASON 4 EPISODE 7

Forget Reform, They Want Abolition

Many organizers in St. Louis have given up on reforming the criminal legal system. Now, they're working to abolish it. And they're starting with the closure of one notorious jail. To reach their goal, they've decided to get involved in electoral politics. Reporter Chad Davis takes a look at what happens when you go from agitating from the outside to working with those in power. Co-reported with Carolina Hidalgo.

Mitzi Miller: I'm Mitzi Miller, and this is 70 Million.

In 2019, we shared the story of a notorious jail in St. Louis and the organizers fighting to shut it down.

Inez Bordeaux: Hey, you all want to close the Workhouse?

Miller: Inez Bordeaux is one of the leaders of the campaign to [Close the Workhouse](#).

Bordeaux: We're keeping people down there with rats, roaches. They got black mold. And we spend \$16 million on it every year.

Miller: Inez is part of a groundswell of organizers and activists in St. Louis who, over the past few years, have built public and political support to shut down the jail.

Their work is a continuation of the movement sparked seven years ago, after a police officer killed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

At first, efforts were focused on reforming the police, holding officers accountable, and [advocating for body cameras](#). But some organizers felt that reform was not leading to significant change. Now, they're focused on abolition. They want to abolish jails and prisons and police—and build something new: a system for public safety that doesn't revolve around incarceration but instead community well-being, healing, and restorative justice.

And part of the movement's strategy is electoral politics. Earlier this year, a [coalition of organizers](#) helped propel [St. Louis' first Black woman mayor into office](#), a [progressive](#) who has committed to closing the Workhouse.

Today, an update on the Close the Workhouse Campaign but also on how the political landscape of St. Louis has changed. What happens when a mayor who aligns with your politics finally gets elected? And what happens when you go from agitating from the outside to working with those in power? Chad Davis brings us the story.

Chad Davis: Inez Bordeaux is standing in a conference room in front of more than a dozen people.

Bordeaux: Good evening everyone, thank you so much for joining us this evening on our first night back at Deaconess in well over a year. [Audience cheers.]

Davis: For the past three years, they've been working to shut down the region's most notorious jail. Inez knows the Workhouse too well. Five years ago, she spent a month inside the jail. She says it was the worst 30 days of her life. So, when she heard about a campaign to close the jail years ago, she showed up. And, she kept showing up.

Bordeaux: You all have no idea how much, I'm not gonna speak for everybody, but I have really, really, really missed you all.

Davis: Now, she's one of the lead organizers for the campaign — and she runs monthly meetings where people come together to strategize. Lately, they've been dreaming about possibilities for the future.

At this meeting, they discuss a recent survey asking residents what they think should be done with the Workhouse building. Ideas are listed in a PowerPoint presentation: a community center, a health clinic, a homeless shelter...

Bordeaux: There's a huge group of people who are like, let's take this building that has caused so much pain and harm and trauma in our city and turn it into something that heals, that helps to heal the city.

Davis: A year ago, spending time and energy on this exercise might have felt unrealistic. But now, the city has a new mayor who's committed to closing the Workhouse.

Tishaura Jones: My name is Tishaura Jones. Let me back up, cause I gotta pay honor to my momma. My name is Tishaura Oneda Jones. My pronouns are she, her, and hers...

Davis: Tishaura Jones was sworn in this year. She's the city's first Black female mayor and she ran a progressive campaign with grassroots support.

Jones: I am standing on stone that was not built for me. I am speaking in a rotunda that never envisioned my ascent to mayor. I am going to walk into an office that my ancestors could never have imagined me working in. But, I'm here. *[Audience cheers.]*

Davis: Her win was a major victory for the campaign to Close the Workhouse. As the city's former treasurer, she long supported shutting down the jail, even before it became a more politically safe position in recent years.

Jones won her race in April — with a promise to close the Workhouse in her first hundred days. Inez remembers the moment the final results came in.

Bordeaux: We all got on a Zoom call and we just cried and celebrated, because we knew what having Tishaura as mayor would mean for one, our work, the work that we do to build political power for black folks to close the Workhouse, to defund the police, to build the St Louis that we all deserve. We knew that it would be a lot easier to fight—not just fight for, but achieve those goals. If we had someone who was like-minded.

Davis: Within months of the new mayor's inauguration, the Workhouse's budget was zeroed out, and all remaining detainees were transferred elsewhere.

The Jones administration also cut nearly 100 vacant police positions and put that four million dollars toward social services, including an affordable housing trust fund and victim support services.

The changes come as the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department still leads the nation in the most police killings per capita.

Activists like Inez are hopeful about what Mayor Jones can achieve. But they are also straightforward about the role they think reforms can play in fundamentally changing the system.

Bordeaux: We've literally been trying for a hundred years to reform policing and the criminal legal system and so on and so forth. I don't believe it can be reformed. It can only be abolished.

Davis: The Close the Workhouse campaign is an abolitionist campaign — its organizers believe that all prisons and jails should be abolished. They don't think that anyone should be locked up.

When we spoke with Inez two years ago, her thinking around abolition was growing.

Bordeaux: It's a very complex idea and I, too, have been someone in the beginnings of the campaign that says, *well what do you do with the rapists and what do you do with the murderers?* Like, I too have had those questions. And what I do is I continue reading and continue to think about the ways that we can go and then fix those root problems.

Davis: She's talking about poverty, limited social services, and education. Inez has said, for years, that closing the Workhouse isn't just about closing a jail, but taking its funding and using that money to support people's well-being.

Bordeaux: Are there not economic opportunities? Can that person not get a job? Are the schools so terrible that they have no hope for, you know, continuing education and to have a career and a life that they can dream of? I think in St. Louis we don't dream about the future, we don't dream about the possibilities, because for so long, there haven't been — the hope for the future is dark. And when we fix a lot of those problems that will allow our children to dream big, to dream about the possibilities, and not have to necessarily go down a wrong path in order to have success or just survive.

[*Music transition.*]

Davis: Four days after Mayor Tishaura Jones took her oath of office, she stood outside the Workhouse, in front of a podium for a press conference. She removed a face mask that read "Black Lives Matter," and addressed a group of reporters.

Jones: *Good afternoon.*

Davis: She had just toured the city's two jails. Alongside her were the city's prosecutor, Kim Gardner, and activist-turned-U.S. congresswoman Cori Bush. Bush stepped up to the podium.

Cori Bush: *We walk away from this taking with us, listening to people say, 'free the slaves.' Listening to people say, 'I want to be able to have water so I can go to the bathroom, there's feces on the floor and I still get a tray.' The people that are saying that 'the food is coming so cold when we get it every single day...'*

Davis: Everyone who spoke said they were outraged by the things they saw and the stories they heard. Mayor Jones reiterated her commitment to cut funding for the Workhouse.

Jones: *And today, the interviews that we had with the detainees at both facilities confirmed that this is the right decision. At the end of the day, people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. As the daughter of someone who was incarcerated, this is personal for me. This is someone's father, someone's mother, brother, from what we learned today, someone's grandfather. Their rights aren't being respected or protected.*

Davis: For years, the previous mayor, Lyda Krewson, and officials in her administration defended their position to keep the jail open. The former public safety director said people's stories about their time there were "embellished."

An organizer named Kayla Reed spoke next....

Kayla Reed: *I heard a story of a man who said his son was saving his allowance to try to bail him out of jail. A child knows that we should do better than what we are doing today.*

Davis: About seven years ago, Kayla was a pharmacy tech. But after Michael Brown was killed in 2014, she joined local protests and became an organizer in the Movement for Black Lives.

Reed: *We are failing, the criminal legal system in this city is failing, the courts are failing, people are being held for months before they're indicted, for months before they see a judge, for months before they have any sort of relief to get home to their families, and their families are actively suffering. We are not making or prioritizing safety, we are perpetuating harm.*

Davis: Kayla co-founded and now leads Action St. Louis, a grassroots racial justice group started by Black millennials — and, one of the main partners in the campaign to Close the Workhouse.

When Kayla first started this work she was an advocate for reforming the system, for investing money into trying to fix policing — things like body cameras and implicit bias training. But police killings didn't stop.

Reed: *And so for us, it really became, um, a conversation about, well, what actually keeps our community safe? How do we prioritize the people and not the institution that's harming us?*

Davis: Kayla realized just how much money was going to the police.

Reed: And who suffers are still the people who are over-policed and our communities writ large. We don't have the infrastructure we need, we don't have the social services we need, and these are all the kind of undercurrent of the things that perpetuate violence and harm in our communities. And so the question really became: How do we radically shift the conversation away from fixing a system that seems to recalibrate itself to continue to harm our folks to prioritizing the wellbeing of our folks? And that's where abolition became a lens that allowed us to say, "actually, this is about saving lives."

Davis: Earlier this year, Mayor Jones selected Kayla to join her mayoral transition team.

Reed: It wasn't a point of victory for me to be on her transition team. I was actually surprised by

the request, but I understood that in my understanding of my work—as a person who is leadership in an organization and perhaps some people some people see me as a leader in our movement—was to make sure that we just didn't get the victory of putting someone in the seat but we get the victory of the things we want to see in our communities.

Davis: But it's not all wins. Less than two months after the Workhouse was emptied, over 100 detainees were moved back there from the City Justice Center, or the CJC, the other St. Louis jail. Over the past year, detainees at the CJC have staged several uprisings, drawing attention to their claims of abuse, poor treatment and unsafe conditions there.

Some of the city's alderpeople accused the administration of closing the jail too quickly and said that correctional officers and detainees would be faced with a significant burden.

Reed: Empty was not closed. There are still folks there and we don't want anyone to be there and we're going to continue to pressure this administration, and organize the constituents to envision a world where we do not have two jails in this community.

Davis: Kayla says she and other activists are playing a long game, though, and the election of Jones isn't the victory but one win in a larger battle.

Reed: It's not just about dismantling the bad, it's about building the good. And when we have the type of alternative responses, when you call 911, someone doesn't show up with a gun, someone isn't coming, and not understanding the moment and using deadly force... When someone comes with care, and support and the adequate training to respond to a crisis that you are facing, those moments are wins. Those moments are wins.

Davis: One of those wins is the work of an organization called the Freedom Community Center, or FCC. The group is focused on rehabilitating people accused of harm while diverting them from jail.

On a recent day, a few dozen people are gathered in a room about 10 minutes away from the Workhouse. They're all thinking about alternatives to incarceration and how they would intervene when encountering a violent situation.

Freedom Community Center Meeting Roundtable:

I might not be able to be on the frontlines and be able to straight up dismantle two gangsters, but I may be able to sit back and de-escalate and be able to talk somebody down from something... [Audience cheers.]

Davis: FCC does this formally by intervening in the police legal system process.

Mike Milton: How do we see the person across from us as somebody who's worthy of love and worthy of intervention? The goal was to get our collective voices together to figure out how can we actually employ strategies that stop violence because we know we are the ones that keep us safe.

Davis: Mike Milton is the founder of FCC. He got into activism and organizing after he went to jail over a decade ago. Mike spent time at both the St. Louis City Justice Center and the Workhouse. The experience helped push him into organizing.

Milton: And it was so full at that time, it was like 2007, it was so full that they had boats, we were sleeping on boats.

Davis: Boats are plastic beds often used in jails. They can be easily moved and stacked on top of each other when they're not being used.

Milton: And it would be four people to a cell that was really meant for two people. But then, when I was released from CJC, and from jail, I also recognized that I never wanted to be that low again. I never wanted to be in that jail again ever in my fucking life. And if I could ever help somebody from avoiding CJC, avoiding the Workhouse, then that's what that's what I want to do.

Davis: Mike spent the last few years focusing on what led people to jail and how poverty is linked to incarceration and pretrial detention. He started to think of incarceration as a system that can't fundamentally change.

Milton: The symbolism that I often give is this idea of a current in a river: you can swim all day long to fight against the current, but eventually, you're going to slowly move, I mean, you're going to get tired, and the current is going to take you away, because it's just a current. The legal system has a current of incarceration; you can swim and try to change and bring in reform prosecutors and reformed judges all day long, but eventually, because that's how it's rooted, it's going to go in the way of co-optation and subjugation and the imprisonment and caging of Black people and poor people, disproportionately. That's just what it is and what it's going to do.

Davis: Mike used to work with The Bail Project, bailing people out of jail. He left earlier this year to start FCC, aimed at preventing people from getting caught in the prison system and prioritizing survivor-centered therapy.

Milton: Harm happens. Someone calls the police, the police writes up a complaint of what happened, they give it to the circuit attorney's office, the circuit attorney decides whether they want to issue a warrant on the person. If they issue a warrant, the police go picks that person up via SWAT or whatever, or even just the police, right? So that's the current system. And then it starts pretrial detention.

What FCC does is that we divert early in that process, pre-charge and pre trial. And so right now, before the police is called, they have an option to reach out to us and we can intervene, right? Community from the community.

Davis: Mike started FCC as a model to rethink public safety in the St. Louis region. When violent crime occurs between different parties, the circuit attorney's office, public defender's office or community members can refer the case to FCC.

If the person who experienced harm consents to the process, the accused person starts to work with therapists and counselors. The months-long process also includes an anti-violence curriculum. FCC also assesses if the individual went through traumatic experiences in their own life that led to them perpetrating harm.

If they complete the program, charges are dropped. The goal here is to create a system that rehabilitates the person who caused harm and to prevent incarceration.

Milton: If we can prove that this model works with counseling and community accountability and restorative justice and investment, now, I can say this is a study. People are more than a study, but we have studied this process, we've seen the efficacy, and now we need to invest into these types of solutions. And take this money directly from the fucking prosecutor's office.

Davis: Defunding the prosecutor's office might be a long way off-- for now, activists like Mike need to work with the system they've got. Mike talked a lot about meeting with the St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner, the prosecuting attorney for the city. In 2016, she ran on a progressive platform centered around criminal justice reform in the city. Since then, she has faced criticism from all sides-- the police union, public defenders, and even within her own office.

But Mike says it's about more than any one leader. His battle is with the entire criminal justice system and carceral model.

Milton: My fight isn't against Kim specifically, my fight is against the role of prosecution. And one thing that I'm thankful for, especially in the route of Ferguson, is that Ferguson really shifted the political framework to where the people actually have power. So that's really what it looks like for Tishaura, for anybody: we shift the dynamic to where the person is actually accountable to the people who are most marginalized — and that's the work of organizing.

Davis: Seeing people moved back into the Workhouse is a reminder to Mike and other abolitionists that a single victory doesn't mean their work is done. Mike reflects on the day Mayor Tishaura Jones moved detainees back to the jail. He compared that with how he would've acted if former Mayor Lyda Krewson did the same. The former mayor was criticized by activists for not closing the Workhouse during her tenure.

Milton: We have to put the same pressure on her that we would have put on Lyda, regardless of what her politics are. And so, one thing that I do that changes, if we did that with Lyda, she would push back and she would say "yeah, y'all don't matter." When we say that, and when we push back on Tishaura, she's saying, "Okay, let me listen." And that's the beauty of having someone who's activist-centered inside of room 200.

Davis: Mayor Jones wasn't available for a recorded interview, but a spokesperson from her office gave a statement. In it, he said, the Workhouse will only be used temporarily, and that this plan allows the administration to expedite repairs to the CJC-- the downtown jail-- and render the Workhouse obsolete more quickly, while keeping detainees and corrections officers safe.

He also said: "Mayor Jones believes that we cannot reform, we must transform safety in St. Louis by putting the 'public' back into public safety."

Mike himself has grown wary of that word "reform."

Milton: The reason why I say reform as a curse word—and I stand on that—but at the same time, in the same way that we think about the Defund the Police movement, because that came from an abolitionist approach, reform is also a strategy to get to abolition. And so yes, we need to fight for electoral politics around prosecutors, because we also have to be responsible and mitigate harm right now for one soul that can be diverted from the legal system. But then also, you know, we use these reforms to be a model of what transformative practices can actually look like.

Bordeaux: I don't even say the word "reform." They, you, this system cannot be reformed.

Davis: Organizer Inez Bordeaux says she's focused on imagining new possibilities and bringing more people into the fight for them.

Bordeaux: So, part of the struggle with that is just like a constant education, a constant me saying over and over again, “we can't reform this, we can't reform this. We have to abolish this because,” and then laying out all the reasons why., I know that this way of organizing or doing it works because it's literally the same thing we did with the Close the Workhouse campaign. And people literally laughed at us. You know, they literally laughed and said, “You can't close this jail.” And we're this close to closing this jail and we did that through just talking to people.

Davis: In the past three years, organizers like Inez, Mike and Kayla changed the minds of many St. Louisans about funding for jails and police, about the role of a prosecutor, about holding elected officials accountable to *all* communities. These organizers recognize there's still work to do, but now, they have more clout—and a blueprint to keep the momentum going.

Miller: That was Chad Davis from St. Louis Public Radio. Carolina Hidalgo co-reported the story.

[Music transition.]

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